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INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL SERVICE IN INDIA

H. M. Billimoria*

What is International Social Service ?

INTERNATIONAL Social Service is a voluntary non-sectarian social welfare agency with headquarters in Geneva (Switzerland). It has many branches and correspondents throughout the world, including India.

In each country International Social Service gives individualized services, and works closely with existing social welfare and health agencies, courts, schools and public and private institutions interested in the welfare of the family. It may best be described as a family welfare agency with clients all over the world. The main focus of the organization is on the families and individuals served, with respect for the individual and in accordance with generally accepted principles of casework practice. This description does not take into consideration the special international character of the organization, which is preserved with its members and units working together on an equal footing, no one unit seeking to dominate or super-impose its ways on another. It is also preserved by a careful choice of its members, both committee and staff, who are persons capable of seeing beyond national boundaries, not only tolerating national differences, but genuinely respecting and appreciating such differences and working towards the good of the total organization.

Its Origin

International Social Service was created in 1921 at the end of the First World War, when this disastrous war left many families without a home, and when very often the bread-winner disappeared, and many people had to move from the country of origin to other places to try and find a living. Thus I.S.S. was created to help immigrants and refugees solve the complex social and legal problems facing them as a result of their movement from one environment to another, and the problems presented by separated families requiring the assistance of social services in several countries. In India, the I.S.S. was started in 1952, after the International Conference of Social Work at Madras.

Why I.S.S. ?

The present mobility of people around the world, the current development of transportation and communication facilities between countries, the increasing numbers of international marriages and many other realities of our shrinking world have added an international dimension to human problems known to social agencies, which requires an international organization to solve the same, having specialised knowledge. An independent body with international ramifications is required to solve problems having special international dimensions to them.

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One may well ask: why is there a need for investment of a social worker's time in I.S.S.? All that is needed is an organization able to put workers in various countries in touch with one another.

It may be recognised that a social worker is educated within his own country, is responsive to his own culture and is subject to its laws. His general professional experience is likely to be of the problems facing the average person who needs social work help in his country. Thus when he is dealing with problems which are outside his experience, and which are affecting people whose conduct of life is strange to him, he is going to be in difficulties if he simply writes to a social worker in another country and outlines the problem on the assumption that there can be common ground. The other social worker too will have certain acceptances of life and professional experience which is part of his culture. Also the first social worker will have a particular view of the nature of the problem, and may be concerned with it only as he thinks it affects his client. But if different aspects of the particular problems are being experienced in both countries, and the way of life in both countries is influencing the persons concerned, causing anxiety and confusion, there has to be a third organisation with the specific task of fitting the two sides into place, of examining, with the two workers concerned, the pressures being exerted at the same time, and of trying to discover within this complex, the forces which can be mobilised to help overcome the difficulties which are being experienced by everybody.

The I.S.S. worker, because of his particular part in the helping function, has to gain this other dimension, and has to develop the extra techniques of communication and analysis which are pertinent to his role. The I.S.S. worker, even though he does not see his clients, has to think through the situation with the clients and the treating local social work-

ers, if he is to reconstruct the total problem and find the elements which can be used.

Thus the acceptance of an international viewpoint, the presentation of known facts of a case, the recognition of gaps in knowledge, are needed to overcome the difficulty.

I.S.S. has also tried to put its cumulative experience in the realm of international social planning. It has contributed to special social studies related to its experience. I.S.S. has consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations and close ties with other U.N. bodies, and collaborative arrangements with numerous inter-governmental and international voluntary bodies requesting information about those aspects of a case which are not known, and cannot be known from one side only.

How does I.S.S. operate ?

The I.S.S. operates through its 19 branches, affiliated bureaux and correspondents. In giving services to individuals, the I.S.S. units, including its unit in India, work through already established social service organizations, making its special services available to other agencies and guiding them in the special aspects of problems of an inter-country nature. In India we make use of existing resources, such as branches of the Indian Council of Social Welfare, Schools of Social Work, Departments of Social Welfare at State level, probation officers and other social workers, both voluntary and professional, who have so willingly given their services. In this way we are providing inter-country, and one might say inter-state, services on a broader and more effective basis than would be possible if we attempted to give direct services in all cases. This does not mean, however, that direct services are not given to individuals, when the case so indicates. The Indian Council has skilled staff which pays home visits when necessary and does follow-up work.

We may say that the I.S.S. in India has been able to service cases not only in towns and cities but also in villages. Thus we have serviced cases from Kashmir in the North to Kanya Kumari in the South, and throughout the length and breadth of India. On an average about 50 cases in a year are received from the I.S.S. and its branches. Cases are received from U.K., U.S.A., France, Germany, Canada, British Columbia, Australia, Hong Kong and West Africa. These represent, one may say fairly well, the countries in which Indians have settled in large number.

AREAS OF WORK

Socio-Legal Cases

The I.S.S. unit in India receives a number of cases in which the problems are of a legal and social nature, as in cases of divorce, support, custody and protection of minor children. In such cases, I.S.S. can have a social worker abroad arrange for a personal interview with the people concerned in order to obtain such information. If divorces are involved, International Social Service can ascertain whether the notice of divorce was properly understood and whether the person concerned desires reconciliation or divorce. I.S.S. can look into the social circumstances of the child in cases of custody of the child, and determine the care he receives. Objective information can be secured about the cost of care and education necessary under the circumstances prevailing in the particular country where the child lives. For instance, we have received a case from I.S.S. American Branch in which the mother is living in India with one of her children. According to information received from the branch, the wife went to India in pursuit of religious philosophy, accompanied by her father. She is staying in a large house in a commune established by a certain gentleman. It is alleged that when the separation agreement was signed the custody of all children was given

to the husband. No mention of going to India was made. However the wife persuaded the husband to allow her to take one of the children with her to Virginia, and instead took him to India. Information about the circumstances of the wife was requested from our contact.

We enquired about the divorced wife and her father and the child living in the commune. It appears that all were happy and in good health. The wife alleged that her husband had taken away the entire property, to the tune of rupees 500,000 under false pretexts. She further stated that her son was living with her with the whole-hearted consent of the father. It appears now that the wife would like the custody of all the children as well as the property, and has requested the I.S.S. to look into the matter. The role of I.S.S. now is to examine together with the American branch the truth of the matter from the point of view of the husband as well as the wife, and plan for the children so that they may arrive at a mutually satisfactory arrangement. The I.S.S. would also inform the husband about the commune in which the wife and his child are living, and reassure him that the mother and the child seem to be quite well.

Cases for support and maintenance of the children are also referred to us, especially when the child happens to be illegitimate. Many of our students go abroad, and sometimes contract relationship with foreigners which result in children. We have received quite a few cases in which the maintenance of the child becomes a problem. In one such case the father acknowledged paternity of the child in a court of law. He agreed to pay for the maintenance of the child, but later on refused to do so. The importance of meeting parental and legal obligations and the consequences of failure to meet the legal obligations were explained to him. If the father did agree to pay the

maintenance, we would have to consider how the money was to be remitted to the child abroad. For this an application had to be made to the Reserve Bank of India. When we explained the special circumstances of the case to the Bank it agreed to allow the father to remit the money for the child living abroad. In order to maintain the confidentiality of the case, we agreed to take the responsibility of receiving the money from the father and forwarding it abroad for the maintenance of the child. However, it may be mentioned that the father has to be reminded constantly and persuaded again and again before the money is forwarded.

There are also cases concerning minor children who required protection of the court as wards of the court. In such cases information is required about the children's background from people in distant lands. Information may be required about relatives' interest in the child, their personal background etc. The I.S.S. can secure background information about the child, and can arrange for a personal interview with the relatives and submit a report as required.

INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

Another increasingly important area of work is that of international adoption. We are receiving cases for servicing in India from people desiring to adopt Indian children. Many of these are Indians with mixed marriages, for instance an Indian married to an American. They therefore especially desire to adopt an Indian child. In such cases, if the parents are in India they have to be interviewed in order to see whether they are fit adoptive couples. Information has also to be obtained about the requirements of the laws of the particular country where the clients are residing.

Here it may be mentioned that International adoption in India presents certain difficulties. We do not have a Law of Adoption

covering all communities. There is only a Hindu Law, under which Hindus only can adopt. But there are many other communities which the law does not cover. The law also does not have all the necessary social safeguards which are incorporated in the Western laws, such as investigation. The adoptive parents in India have to make sure that the child is abandoned or destitute, or the child is under the guardianship of the authority of an orphanage. If this orphanage has obtained legal guardianship under the Ward and Guardianship Act, they may hand over the child in adoption to any person. If this procedure is followed, then the adoptive couple may in turn apply to the court for guardianship. Then the Indian Government may allow the child to go out of India. Even then, legally speaking, the child is under permanent foster care, and the adoptive parents are only the legal guardians of the child. The Indian Council of Social Welfare has prepared a draft bill under which all Indians may adopt. This draft bill also has safeguards for the protection of the child and the adoptive parents, as well as the natural mother. It recognises international adoption, which has to be done according to the laws of the country of which the child is a citizen, as well as according to our laws.

We now understand that the Government of India is also actively considering the passing of a bill on Adoption. We are in communication with the Government regarding this bill and have pointed out the need for special safeguards necessary for the protection of children who are being adopted abroad. The ICSW has made a representation to the Bombay High Court that cases of international adoption that appear before it under the Guardians and Wards Act need to be investigated, and has offered to do so. The Court is considering the matter, and perhaps we shall receive a favour-

able answer. As already indicated the role of I.S.S. is to improve existing practice on the basis of its experience in the matter of legislation. We in India too are carrying out this role. We have alerted the Bombay High Court and the Government of India about the prevailing situation and the need for proper safeguards for our children adopted abroad.

It may be pointed out that international adoption in India presents certain problems in international law — such as whether an adoption can be valid according to the laws of another country, if there is no law on adoption in India. The I.S.S. has established contacts with lawyers who are able to give expert advice on such matters. Cases are referred for follow-up work when adoption has already taken place in another country and the adoptive couples happen to reside in India.

Reunion of Families and Family Welfare

One of the most important aims of the International Social Service is that of preserving family integrity. The International Social Service endeavours to unite families separated by distance for various reasons, such as the father working in a foreign place whom the wife and children may wish to rejoin. Sometimes a child alone may be receiving education in another country, and may not be able to rejoin the parents abroad. In such cases the International Social Service intervenes. An attempt is made to help the family and the children to be reunited. Many such cases have been referred to the Indian Council of Social Welfare by the International Social Service.

Work with Immigrants and Refugees

Another important area of work is with immigrants and refugees. We are concerned about Indians going abroad and staying in another country, or coming to India

as refugees. These refugees are war victims, or they have suffered from the political changes of government that have taken place in this world. In such cases we have made an attempt to contact resources which help them to settle in our country. For instance we have received cases of refugees from Zanzibar arriving in India due to the change of Government. The refugees requested the I.S.S. to put forward their cases for a pension to the British Government. Full detailed reports of the economic and social circumstances of the refugees was passed on to the I.S.S. in U.K. They were requested to make representation on behalf of refugees to the British Overseas Department of the U.K. Government. Due to this representation, and also because of discussion in the British Parliament on these cases, we are happy to say that the refugees in India will be able to receive their pension from the British Government, and will be benefited by substantial amounts. These cases are mentioned especially as they show how I.S.S. may help to influence, government policies when regular diplomatic channels are closed.

Preparation is also needed for Indians emigrating abroad. The International Social Service in India gives individualised attention to emigrants, especially where the movements of children as part of family groups, or children separated from their family, or unaccompanied refugee children or orphaned children are concerned. The child's adjustment to living in a new country largely depends on the care and attention given to him and his preparation for the future. Being aware of this, the International Social Service in India has given special attention to such cases. In this connection it may be mentioned that we also give services in some cases to young wives who have emigrated from abroad and have settled in India, or young persons who wish to marry Indians and settle in India. A great deal of cultural

adjustment is needed for people from foreign countries when they marry an Indian and settle in India. Sometimes because of culture differences the marriage results in breakdown. In such cases an orientation is given to the clients concerned as well as to the family members, and an attempt is made to assist in bringing about the adjustment of the wife to her in-laws and her husband.

Working in medical settings

Modern living, transportation and communications have added an international dimension to human problems familiar to hospitals and health agencies. More and more people seek medical care outside their own countries. Thus hospitals and health agencies abroad are receiving more and more patients for whom treatment and planning necessitate enquiries in our country. Travel over long distance for medical care presents problems, not only for the patient but for his family too. If an Indian patient has been hospitalised in U.K. or some other country, the family difficulties at home may worry the patient and impede his progress. In such cases the International Social Service in India has been able to provide information and services to relatives which will help the patient in U.K. to recover. The hospital about the patient or his family. Financial means are an important part of this treatment. Exploration of resources may help the patient to benefit from the treatment. It is

also possible that the treatment the patient is receiving abroad is available in India, and the International Social Service may help such a patient to arrange for treatment in his home country. Participation of the family in caring for him immediately upon discharge, and before he returns to India, or between hospitals, may be necessary, and this may be arranged by the International Social Service. The patient has to be prepared for the treatment and his reception in India. The International Social Service in India will be able to arrange for a social worker to see the family concerned and secure the information needed and prepare the family.

In brief, it may be mentioned that there is no area of human life or human problems which the International Social Service is not equipped to meet through its highly specialised services and the individual attention which is paid to persons in need.

Publicity and Public Relations

It may be mentioned that publicity and Public Relations form an important part of International Social Service work. People need to know about our services so that they may be able to refer such cases to us when needed. The I.S.S. in India is planning to expand its services, making them known on a wider scale, through various medias of publication.